FRANK READE
WEEKLY MAGAZINE.
Containing Stories of Adventures on Land, Sea & in the Air.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription $2.50 per year. Application made for Second-Class Entry at N. Y. Post Office.

No. 91. NEW YORK, JULY 22, 1904. Price 5 Cents.

THE MISSING PLANET; OR FRANK READE, JR.'S HUNT FOR A FALLEN STAR.

By "NONAME."

He would have plunged the knife into the Russian but for an incident. Something struck him in the neck. He gave a groan and pitched forward. The bullet had come from the rifle of Pomp on the deck of the Zenith.

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THE MISSING PLANET;

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CHAPTER I.

THE FALL OF DEUCALION.

Far up in the Valdai Hills, of Russia, is the great observatory of Marchetsky, named after its builder, a philanthropic merchant of Moscow, who was a passionate student of astronomy. One day, in the year 1903, the Marchetsky Observatory was the scene of a remarkable conference.

A score of the most noted scientists in Europe had come by the quickest methods to Marchetsky upon an errand of the utmost importance to science. They had spared no expense for quick passage, and had sacrificed all engagements elsewhere to keep this appointment.

For a very wonderful thing had happened.

Far beyond the greater lights of the Milky Way, and yet distinguished easily from the lesser constellations, was the somewhat obscurely known planet of Deucalion. It was a mite of a world in itself, and might have easily dropped from its orbit without being missed, were it not for the fact that it was generally used by astronomers in locating or reckoning the elliptic circle of the comet of Martini which was now nearly due.

So that it was by the merest accident and a remarkable coincidence that Professor Sergius Tobalski witnessed a sight which, perhaps, no other living astronomer has ever witnessed, viz.: the total collapse and extinction of the planet of Deucalion, all in a few brief seconds of time.

The professor had at the time the image of the planet on the mirror of his largest telescope, and was gazing full at it when the remarkable display occurred. So far as known he was the only man on earth who watched the disruption of the planet.

The spectacle was a peculiar one. The planet seemed suddenly to assume the proportions of the moon, was like a ball of fire in the heavens' arch, and then down into space shot a section of it like a long trailing meteor.

This meteor was in the sky for two days, and then finally vanished below the horizon. All this while Tobalski watched it with scarcely a wink of sleep.

For he knew that this must be a fragment of the extinguished planet, and that it was traveling toward the earth and would most likely fall upon it. Reckoning its lin

across the sky by the most scientific computation, Tobalski reckoned that it must fall somewhere in the heart of the great wilderness of Siberia. What would be the result of the fall he could only conjecture.

How large the fragment of the exploded planet was he could only guess. But he knew that it must be large.

The rest of the planet had doubtless departed likewise in fragments for other parts of the universe. Certain it was that Deucalion was a missing planet.

Just six hours after the descending meteor had vanished below the horizon and gone from Tobalski's sight, the entire continent of Asia and part of Europe experienced a rude shock, succeeded by a number of tremendous wavelike vibrations.

This was what Tobalski had been waiting for. He instantly sprang up with glowing face.

To all the scientific centers of Europe he sent that day telegraph messages, calling an important astronomical meeting at Vaidai Observatory. A great thing had happened; a mighty fact was proved.

In answer to the professor's summons the scientific heads of societies, to the number of a score, at once repaired post-haste to Marchetsky.

Excitement was intense when Tobalski told his story. Incredulous members of the party searched the sky for Deucalion, and were convinced when they found it missing.

The result was that Sergius Tobalski became an object of almost veneration in the eyes of his compatriots as being the only living being to witness the extinction of a planet. Who could say but that in just this way the earth might some day reach the end of its career?

The cause for the collapse of Deucalion of course could only be guessed at. But the popular theory was that the expansion of gases in its interior had caused it to fly into fragments. Many of these were no doubt in space and invisible at such a distance. But at least one fragment had been hurled far enough toward the earth to enter its circle of attractive force.

"This is the greatest event in the astronomical phenomena of this century," declared Professor Sergius.

"I agree with you, friend Tobalski," said Senor Luigi Castellar, the Spanish astronomer. "I would give all I am worth to have had your opportunity of witnessing the disruption of Deucalion."

"Same here!" cried Von Ardhen, the Austrian scientist. "Ah, Tobalski always was a lucky dog!"

"Which fact we must not begrudge him in all generosity," declared Monsieur La Valeyne, the Parisian savant.

"By no means!" chorused the others.

"The question is," said Tobalski, after acknowledging these compliments, "what are we to do about it? Ought we not to make some effort to visit the spot where this fragment of the planet impacted with the earth?"

There was a moment of silence.

"I think really," said Von Ardhen, "that there is a unanimous sentiment in favor of this move, but the question of expediency, or rather, execution, is what puzzles all. Am I not right?"

"Ay," was the chorused reply.

"Well," said Tobalski, in surprise, "I fail to see any serious obstacle."

"Ah, that is like a Russian," laughed La Valeyne. "Now, my dear fellow, don't you see that this planet has had the extremely bad taste to drop into the most isolated and wild part of the steppes? We are all old men, and such a journey means privation and hardships which it might be hard for us to stand."

"Oh, that is it, eh?" exclaimed Tobalski, with a lightening up of his countenance. "Well, I will admit that it would be an arduous trip. But see how well one would be repaid."

"One moment, gentlemen," said Castellar. "My friend here, Senor Alden Montclair, from America, declares that he has a complete solution of the difficulty."

"The American!" was the general exclamation, and all eyes were fixed upon the quiet, shrewd-faced man with iron-gray whiskers who had until now been silent.

Alden Montclair was President of the North American Society, and as chance had it was in Paris with his friend Castellar when Tobalski sent out his call.

Montclair would not have been an American if he had not embraced the opportunity at once to accompany the party to Valdai. He had been one of the most interested of listeners.

But when the difficulties of a visit to the wilds where the planet had fallen, the perils and privations, the dangers from wild beasts and savage men were discussed, he was ready with an expedient. He announced this fact to Castellar.

Montclair bowed politely, and facing the throng, said in excellent French:

"Gentlemen, and colleagues, I know of a method of transportation to the spot you speak of which is safe and wholly impervious to the perils which you mention."

There was a moment of silence.

His declaration was treated with evident respect, for all knew the faculty of his people for resource and brilliant

achievement. To the true American there is no such word as fail. Yet the incredulity was general.

Sergius Tobalski elevated his eyebrows, and finally said:

"What is your method, Monsieur le Americaine?"

The reply made by Montclair was incisive, confident and instant. It created an instant sensation.

"By airship!"

The savants stared at Montclair, and then exchanged glances. A murmur of incredulity had begun to arise, when Castellar took the initiative.

"Gentleman," he said, impressively, "I can assure you that Monsieur Montclair speaks advisedly. I will answer for the correctness of his assertion. It is possible to journey safely to the locality named with an airship."

"Why, of course," said Von Ardhen; "always assuming it possible to find the airship."

"Which is quite possible," replied Montclair, quietly.

Now they all stared.

"An airship!" exclaimed Tobalski. "Is there a practicable one in existence?"

"There is!"

"Where?"

"In America."

All looked blank. Von Ardhen was the first to speak.

"Very good, Monsieur Montclair," he said; "we know you Americans are progressive, but if you have solved the problem of aerial navigation, then you have outdone the world."

"It is solved," replied Montclair, quietly. "A friend of mine, Mr. Frank Reade, Jr., of Readestown, U. S. A., owns an airship called the Zenith, in which he shortly proposes to sail around the world. I can easily prove all this to you. It is possible that I can induce him to take a couple of us to the fallen planet. I will cable him to-day."

The scientists were all too much overcome with this revelation to be able to make any coherent reply for some moments. Then they relaxed their incredulity and crowded about Montclair, asking him all about the Zenith and its gifted young inventor and owner.

"Now I come to think of it," said La Valeyne, "I have heard of this Mr. Reade. Is he not the inventor of a submarine boat?"

"Yes," replied Montclair.

"So he has perfected an airship! Well, there could be no better or more practicable method of traversing those Siberian wilds safely. But do you think he could be impressed into our service?"

"I cannot answer that question until I have communicated with him," replied Montclair. "Frank Reade, Jr., is a man easily enlisted in any project of adventure. I think that he will not refuse!"

"What do you say, gentlemen?" cried Castellar, with enthusiasm; "shall we organize a society of exploration now, and authorize M. Montclair to confer with M. Reade?"

The reply was a unanimous assent, and at once plans were decided upon. The greatest of enthusiasm seemed to prevail.

CHAPTER II.

A DISAPPOINTMENT—THE START IS MADE.

Several things were decided upon at once.

First, Montclair was to cable to the American inventor full particulars. If he would come, then Montclair and Tobalski were to await the coming of the airship to Valdai and proceed aboard it as the representatives of the society.

It was voted to pay Mr. Reade handsomely for the service rendered.

With this the meeting dissolved.

Monclair at once took a train for Paris. Arrived there he went at once to the office of the cable company and sent the following message:

"FRANK READE, JR., Readestown, U. S. A.:

"Will you undertake to find the fragment of the planet Deucalion, which fell somewhere in Siberia a short while ago, and which can be the more easily accomplished with the aid of your airship? Pecuniary recompense is offered, as well as the grand opportunity for research and adventure and a signal service for science. If you will treat this favorably, cable me at 14 Boulevard des Capucins, Paris, France. I await your honored reply:

"(Signed) ALDEN MONTCLAIR.
"Professor of American Society."

It was two days before the impatient young scientist received a reply. He was angry at the delay.

"Some thing must be wrong," he declared. "It is not like Frank to treat a communication in such a manner."

But the moment he glanced at the cablegram all was explained to him. Thus it read:

"ALDEN MONTCLAIR, No. 14 Boulevard des Capucins, Paris:

"Regret to inform you that the Zenith sailed from Readestown four days since on a trip around the world, with Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp, his men, on board. You are too late.

"(Signed) ALBERT ST. CLAIR, Clerk."

For a moment Montclair was so chagrined that he could not speak. Then he went at once to the Hotel Marie, where the scientists were stopping, and awaiting the reply as well.

Tobalski, Castellar and all the rest were in the lobby when he entered. His downcast appearance did not convey a favorable impression.

"He has got the answer," said Von Ardhen.

"And I'll swear it is not a reassuring one!" declared La Valeyne.

"How is it, Montclair?" cried Castellar. "Is M. Reade en route in his airship?"

"Yes," replied Montclair, dismally, "but not for Valdai."

"How?"

"He sailed from Readestown three days since on his journey around the world. Here is his cablegram."

A pall of gloom shut down over the spirits of all. There was a period of silence. It was a great disappointment.

But finally Tobalski rallied and said:

"Come, gentlemen, there is no use making a funeral of it. What is to be done?"

"Abandon the matter," said Von Ardhen.

"Never!" declared the Russian scientist. "That would be a blot upon this society. I, for one, am willing to try the journey in a sledge, or even on foot, if any of you will volunteer to accompany me. Which of you will go?"

There was a deep silence.

No one volunteered.

The scientists all looked blankly at each other. Suddenly a resolute voice was heard.

"I will go!"

It was Montclair.

Tobalski's face lit up.

"Good!" he cried. "But the party need not be limited to two. Who else cares to go?"

"You are younger men," said La Valeyne. "None of us old fellows could hope to return alive."

"There may be truth in that," acknowledged Tobalski. "Very well, M. Montclair; it is you and I. Shall we lose no time in the start?"

"The quicker the better," said the American, laconically. "We need only to get together an equipment."

"Just so, and I believe we can travel very comfortably in one of our Russian sledges. Unless wolves trouble us greatly we shall progress famously. The hostile natives, the robber bands of Cossacks, are certain to be in more southerly latitudes grazing their stock. We shall succeed."

"I will leave the plan of equipment to you," said Montclair. "You are familiar with the country and should know our needs better."

"Very well. We can be ready to start in three days from St. Petersburg. We will follow the sixtieth parallel to the Siberian frontier. At Petropolavkai we will strike a little to the north for Traitskai on the River Ob. Thence we bear on into Iakontsk, and there is where we are going to encounter our greatest perils."

"We should find the fallen planet somewhere in Iakontsk?" asked Montclair.

"A few degrees south of the Arctic Circle, and just beyond the boundary line," replied Tobalski. "That is as near as I can reckon."

"Which I have no doubt is correct," declared Montclair. "Where and when shall I meet you?"

"In three days at St. Petersburg. I will quickly get the equipment together when we reach there."

Montclair waited for no more. He hastened away to inform his friends in other parts of the world of his purpose.

He was deeply enthused with it, and looked forward to a successful accomplishment of the project. Of course, the project became at once known to all the scientific world.

The newspapers were filled with exciting accounts of the fall of the planet, and in many cases the accounts were very largely exaggerated.

Of course, this made of Montclair and Tobalski, lions of the hour, and their names were upon everybody's lips, while the public waited eagerly for the result of their plans.

Meanwhile, Tobalski was busily making arrangements at St. Petersburg.

He secured a droshky, or Russian vehicle, of a class which can be made to use either with wheels or with sleds, as the travelers found necessary. Aboard this he placed provisions and equipments, arms and scientific instruments.

Two Cossack guides were employed to act as drivers and guards.

Four stout and swift Russian horses were to draw the vehicle.

Tobalski had not the greatest of faith in the Cossacks,

for once upon their native heath he feared that they might prove treacherous. However, he was determined to keep a sharp eye on them, and relied upon his pistols to insure obedience.

He knew that Montclair was an American, and like all of that nationality, of great pluck and resource. So he felt comparatively secure.

One snapping, clear and cold morning a gentleman alighted from the train in the St. Petersburg station. He was clad warmly in furs, and had the distingue appearance of a foreigner.

It was Montclair, and he at once recognized Tobalski, who was waiting for him.

The Russian savant welcomed his fellow-traveler warmly. In a few moments they were being driven rapidly to the savant's house in a droshky.

"Then all is ready for the start," said Montclair, eagerly.

"All is ready," replied Tobalski, "but first I must offer you refreshments."

An hour later the droshky, with its driver and guard, drew up in front of the scientist's house. The two travelers entered it and away went the four horses at a mad pace.

The start was made.

They were soon skimming over the post-roads on their way to the Siberian frontier. They were provided with a special ukase from the Czar, so that they expected no trouble with the government officials on the way.

Fifty miles were made the first day, and they stopped in a little Russian village. At an early hour the next day they were again en route.

And so for many days they kept on. Once it became necessary to drop out one of the horses, but a new one was easily procured.

Thus far the Cossack drivers had proved efficient and faithful. Slowly but surely they were drawing nearer to the great frontier.

Of course, the real hardships of the journey must be experienced after entering the land of the exile. They knew this full well.

But all went well, until they finally reached Petropolavkai. Here they crossed the frontier into Siberia. The roads were thronged with poor wretches en route to a life of exile and misery.

The papers from the Czar opened all gates for the two scientists, and they had soon left the frontier station far behind and struck out into the heart of Siberia.

To detail the many incidents of that journey would require too much space. They stopped at night wherever possible, at an inn or in the hut of a peasant or even the rude camp of some wandering tribe of friendly Cossacks.

And thus the distance was cut down until one day they came to the banks of the River Ob.

By some mistake they had failed to reach Traitskai, the Siberian town where they had hoped to spend the night. It was some distance to the north, but as the hour was late it was decided to camp on the spot until another day.

It was a lonely locality, on the verge of a mighty pine forest, with the sluggish, rolling river in front.

A campfire was made in the pines and preparations made for passing the night. Montclair and Tobalski slept usually in the hood of the droshky, well protected by warm furs.

The Cossacks bivouacked about the fire in their own way.

The night was as black as Erebus and Montclair had just begun to drop asleep when he felt a touch upon his arm.

He turned instantly and saw Tobalski's eager face over him. The Russian was very pale and excited.

"Pardon, Monsieur Montclair!" he said in French, "but I need your help."

"Eh?" exclaimed Montclair, in surprise. "What is the matter?"

"Our Cossacks—you remember our last stopping place, they met some of their own race? Well, something is wrong. They have left the camp."

"Jericho!" exclaimed Montclair. "You don't mean that they are traitors?"

"Oui, Monsieur, and I fear we are going to have a bit of trouble before this night is over," declared Tobalski, ominously.

CHAPTER III.

ACROSS THE ATLANTIC.

Frank Reade, Jr., had finished his airship, the Zenith, and had made all preparations for a wonderful flight in mid-air around the world.

Readestown was all astir over the matter, and hundreds of distinguished men from near and far visited the great machine works and inspected the new invention.

Frank was always glad to receive visitors, and to the best of his ability showed them the fine points of the new airship.

It is hardly necessary to introduce the young inventor and his companions and faithful adherents—Barney O'Shea, the Irishman, and Pomp, the negro, to the reader.

The world over Frank Reade, Jr., is known as the handsome, gifted young inventor who perfected the submarine boat and the wonderful airship.

His inventions were most wonderful, and had won him such fame as no other inventor could claim.

One morning Barney and Pomp, fresh from a lively scuffle in the shop yard, came tumbling into his private office in response to a summons.

"Hi, you rascals!" said Frank, sternly. "Are you quite sure that the Zenith is in readiness to sail to-morrow?"

"Shure, sor, as fit as a fiddle," declared Barney, turning a flip-flap.

"Yes, sah; eberyfing am in apple-pie ordah," said Pomp, cutting a pigeon wing.

"Good!" said the young inventor. "We shall sail exactly at ten o'clock. Leave nothing undone"

"Yez may be aisy on that, sor."

"Dat am right, sah."

And away the two jokers scampered. At this moment a particular friend called and Frank led him away to see the airship.

The Zenith had been constructed upon lines consistent with speed, strength and security, for Frank wished to make a fast trip, and also knew that the different changes of clime would tell powerfully upon the constitution of the voyagers unless the utmost precautions were taken to guard against the sudden changes in temperature.

He had considered a number of plans, and had once decided upon the model of a yacht, but finally discarded this for the lines of a cigar-shaped vessel.

The smooth, round body and keen-pointed bow would offer the least resistance to the wind, while the round, enclosed hull would be secure from changes of temperature.

The hull of the Zenith had been fashioned of light alloy of aluminum and steel, and was bullet-proof. In its sides there were large plate-glass observation windows and doors, and a platform or deck was built out to a width of four feet on each side, well protected by guard-rails.

A pilot house occupied the upper forward part of the cigar-shaped hull. A flat deck and upper cabin extended back of this clear aft. Upon this was placed a powerful searchlight of great range.

Five revolving steel masts rose from the hull of the airship, on each of which was placed a powerful revolving helice. By means of these the airship was enabled to overcome the law of gravitation and reach the upper stratum of atmosphere.

At the stern was a huge four-bladed propeller, which furnished motive power. The airship was capable of making great speed with this, driven at high speed by powerful electric engines.

But the interior of the Zenith was a revelation.

There was a main cabin, richly furnished, with a small library of valuable books and a cabinet of scientific apparatus, with maps and charts and all the requisites of the navigator.

Then there were half a dozen small but beautiful staterooms, a dining-room, a cookroom or galley for Pomp, and a gunroom, where were kept several stands of repeating rifles and other weapons.

In the hold were provisions for a year's cruise. No expense had been spared in equipping the Zenith.

The pilot-house was in itself a region of wonder. There was the keyboard, with its multitudinous connections, and by means of which the ship was controlled and regulated. Under the pilot-house were the electric engines and dynamos, with the wonderful storage system, which was Frank Reade, Jr.'s secret.

With this meagre description of the Zenith we will ask the reader to be kindly content, leaving the rest for the story to develop.

Promptly at ten the next day, as Frank had declared, the airship sailed. It leaped up into the air like a huge bird and at once set a course eastward.

A great multitude saw the departure of the airship and cheered it to the echo.

Readestown and its environs soon faded from view. The great expanse of country, two thousand feet below, looked like one great passing map.

The aerial voyagers found time to study it with some interest, but yet the speed of the airship was not in any measure checked and it kept on, like a racehorse, for the sea.

In due time this came to view, and soon the Zenith was above it and leaving the shores of America far behind.

All manner of vessels were seen upon the ocean's surface below, and many signals were made from their decks. Some of these Frank answered.

After standing out to sea for five hundred miles, Frank made a more northerly voyage, and one day in due course land was sighted.

This was the coast of Norway, in the vicinity of the

Lofoden Islands. As the rugged coast became plainer the voyagers could not help but remark upon its mighty grandeur, in the height of its cliffs and the depths of its fiords.

"Begabers, it's loike phwat yez moight expect to see in the divil's own country," declared Barney.

And the others agreed with him.

Remarkably swift had been the passage of the airship from America. But now powerful head winds were encountered and a heavy storm set in from the north.

For days the airship battled against this.

The cold was intense, but the voyagers were secure in the cabins of the Zenith, where the cold could not penetrate.

So it was slow progress across the Gulf of Bothnia, into Russia, leaving Cronstadt to the southward. The airship was now headed for Siberia.

They were now in a region not devoid of snow and freezing weather. They passed over villages and lonely habitations of a quaint kind and a reminder that they were traveling in a foreign land.

Whenever the natives caught sight of the airship they seemed the victims of intense excitement.

Some fled in fear into their houses. Others stood in a stupor and many fell flat on their faces where they were.

It was plain that they were an ignorant race of people, and the airship appealed to the superstitious element in their natures.

All this was much to the amusement of Barney and Pomp.

"Shure, I'd loike to bate some sinse into their thick skkulls!" he declared. "I'd moighty quick larn thim a thing or two!"

"Huh!" commented Pomp.

"Phwat do yez say?" flashed Barney, turning upon the darky. "Mebbe yez don't believe phwat I'm tellin' yez?"

"Ain't got nuffin' to say," replied Pomp, sniffing the air contemptuously.

"Shure, it ain't necessary fer yez to say anythin'," declared Barney. "It's yer face as gives ye away. Av yez don't belave phwat I say, I'll put the airship down an' convince yez!"

"Yo' am talkin' froo' yo' hat," declared the coon. "Does yo' s'pose yo' cud lick all outdo's? Why, dere am people down dere fo' to turn yo' inside out quick as dat!"

Barney's nose was up in a moment. It did not require at any time but a spark to kindle his pugnacious nature. Pomp had fed its flames.

He snapped his fingers under the coon's nose.

"Mebbe yez think I'm a stuffed image, yez black monkey!" he cried. "P'raps yez wud loike fer to thry me yesilf!"

"Huh! I don't reckon I'd turn out ob mah path fo' yo'!" retorted Pomp.

Barney was furious.

Off went his jacket.

"I take that as an insult," he declared, puffily, "an' no man kin insult Barney O'Shea widout a bit av a shlap in return."

Saying which, the Celt lightly biffed Pomp on the cocoanut. Of course, the coon never felt it, but he accepted the gauntlet so clearly thrown.

He lowered his head like a mad bull and made a rush for the Celt. They came together with a crash.

Then followed the liveliest kind of a tussle. They scrapped and tugged until both were so clearly out of breath and exhausted that they were unable to move.

Then they managed to recover sufficient strength and wind to get on their feet, and by mutual consent abandon the contest. Neither was injured and they were yet the warmest of friends.

For a week the airship battled against the elements and finally got over into Siberia. Here they emerged from the storm.

For some days they sailed on over the wild region until they finally came to the River Ob.

Crossing this a long, open plain extended before their view, bounded on the south by great forests of pine.

"This is Siberia, the land of exiles," said Frank. "Many a dark tragedy has found its culmination here. Ah, that is a blot upon the fame of Russia."

At this juncture night came on. The airship sailed on just the same, but at a slower gait. The broad glare of the searchlight glinted across the white surface of the plain.

Suddenly Barney gave a sharp cry.

"Shure, Mr. Frank, cum here!"

Frank bounded into the pilot-house.

"What is it, Barney?" he asked.

"Wud yez be afther lookin' down there, sor? Shure, I'm thinkin' there's trouble."

A glance was enough.

Frank experienced a thrill.

The sight he beheld was one well calculated to make one's blood run cold. There upon the snowy plain was a Russian sledge, with the horses upon their knees, and beset by wolves.

In the sledge were two men who, with their rifles, were

vainly trying to hold the hungry pack at bay. This was seen to be a forlorn hope, and that they were destined to become themselves the next victims.

CHAPTER IV.

TREACHERY—THE WOLVES.

Tobalski's ominous declaration could not help but give Montclair a chill. For a moment he was appalled.

"There is no doubt?" he asked. "You really believe that these Cossacks have turned traitors?"

"There is not the least doubt of it," replied the Russian savant, gloomily; "if not, why are they missing?"

"Have you looked for them?"

"Everywhere."

"And you can find no trace?"

"Not the slightest."

Montclair was now wideawake. He grasped his rifle.

"We must act," he said. "Where do you think they have gone? What is their game?"

"I believe they have gone forth to confer with their colleagues, who are in hiding outside the camp. When they return they will pounce upon us unawares. We will never be heard from again."

Montclair drew a deep breath.

"We must be prepared," he said; "we must anticipate their game."

Tobalski was in doubt.

"What is your plan?" he asked.

"A simple one. We will harness the horses to the droshky. When they return, if we cannot hold them at bay or defeat them, we will trust to the speed of our horses to escape."

Tobalski shook his head.

"You forget," he said, "every Cossack owns a horse, and they could run us down with the speed of wolves."

"We could make a running fight; at least, we must not surrender."

"No," said the Russian, arousing himself. "I am ready to fight to the last. We will do as you suggest."

They crept out of their warm berth, and in a few moments had hitched the horses to the droshky. The absent Cossacks were still away.

But suddenly faint voices were heard in the distance. Then the two wretches came back into the firelight.

They seated themselves nonchalantly by the fire and began to warm themselves. Montclair and Tobalski watched them from the hood of the droshky.

Montclair had begun to think their fears groundless, when suddenly one of the villains arose.

It was a critical moment.

It could be seen that he was looking intently toward the droshky. Several seconds passed.

As if assured, though, he suddenly turned and made a swift gesture. The result was magical.

From the gloom there appeared silently and shadow-like a score of forms. They crept into the circle of firelight.

On God's footstool there could scarcely be found another such a gathering of savage barbarians. In their rugged, wolfish faces mercy nor intelligence even did not dwell.

There was nothing but avarice and savage greed. They were born to the trade of murder and theft.

The two scientists crouching in the hood of the droshky realized the critical character of their position well. They knew that life was a light matter with these human wolves.

"If they make a move toward us," whispered Montclair, "pick your man and drop him. I will do the same. Then while you are firing at them I'll get the horses under way."

From their position it was evident the wretches could not see that the horses were attached to the droshky. For some moments they remained in earnest consultation in the fire-lighted circle.

Then two of them started toward the droshky.

They carried long knives in their hands. Murder was in their faces. They approached from the rear.

"Now!" whispered Montclair, "take the man on the left."

Crack-ack!

Out from the head of the droshky leaped a glare of flame. The two Cossacks went down like tenpins.

Up sprung Montclair to the driver's box. With the reins in his hands he urged the horses to a wild plunge.

Away went the droshky, rocking and swaying. Meanwhile, Tobalski was emptying his rifle.

There was no doubt but that the Cossacks were astounded at the unexpected denouement, but their first move was to get out of range.

Bullets came whistling after the droshky, but did no harm. Then began the mad race across the snowy plain.

They had crossed the Ob before making camp, so they were compelled to keep to the eastward. But this was not altogether undesirable.

Every moment Montclair expected to hear the pursuing steeds of the Cossacks, and the whistle of their bullets, but to his surprise and relief, nothing of the sort occurred.

The Cossacks, for some reason, did not make a pursuit.

On went the droshky into the darkness of the plain. To the southward there ran a long, deep line of wood.

Montclair urged the horses on until they began to falter. Then, assured that there was no pursuit, he turned and spoke to Tobalski:

"What do you think? Will they give us pursuit?"

"It is very strange," replied the Russian scientist. "I cannot understand their game."

"Perhaps they dare not."

"Ah, there is a better reason. You do not know the Cossack as I do. He is merciless and knows not fear."

"For the nonce we are safe. I must rest the horses."

"We are safe—unless—hark!"

Tobalski started up, and his form was rigid as steel. Had it been light his face would have shown as white as chalk.

"What is it?" asked Montclair.

"Listen!"

From the distance far in the dark woods there came a faint, mournful sound. It was like a distant wail.

"Do you know what that is?"

"What?"

"A worse foe than the Cossacks!"

"What do you mean?"

"The wolves!"

Montclair could not repress a shiver.

He knew that his companion was right. The distant cry was that of a wolf. Soon it would be answered, then it would draw nearer.

The Siberian wolf is a foe to be truly dreaded by the traveler after dark.

Powerful animals they are, and in such enormous packs do they run that they are truly to be much feared. In their position the two travelers had much to fear.

The four horses were fagged.

They could not go a race with a pack of wolves, and must certainly succumb to their fangs. The two men in the droshky would do well if they could hold the pack at bay until dawn.

The chances were strong that they would also be overpowered and devoured. It was a fearful thing to contemplate.

But there was no use to abandon themselves to fate. It behooved them to make as strong a fight as they could.

So Montclair started the horses ahead in the hopes of reaching some possible point of vantage.

But now a hundred wailing voices were heard in the forest. They swelled louder in volume every moment.

The wolves were on the scent. Every moment the uproar increased.

And now they were seen.

From the dark recesses of the forest they swarmed into view. On over the white plain they came.

Crack! crack!

The rifles spoke.

Two of the monsters fell. There was but a brief pause, as their carcasses were quickly eaten by their ravenous companions.

Then, on they came again!

Shots were fired with great rapidity, but it was like trying to stem a resistless flood.

They came about the droshky like a swarm of bees. Down went the helpless horses. The terrible fangs were tearing the hood of the droshky.

"My God!" gasped Tobalski, "we are lost, Montclair. They will surely get at us! What can we do?"

"What is that?" exclaimed Montclair, with a sudden, sharp cry.

A strange, white light seemed to fall about them. It was too powerful for moonlight.

The two besieged men turned their heads to see from whence it came, but they were dazed by its awful brilliance.

The wolves, cowed by the powerful light, skulked away. Then down from the sky came a voice.

"Ahoy, down there! phwat are yez doin' in this woild part of the worruld?"

"An Irishman!" cried Montclair; "that settles it. It is no supernatural visitation. Ahoy!" he shouted. "Who are you?"

"Shure, this is the airship Zenith as belongs to Misther Frank Reade, Jr."

"What!" gasped Montclair, so delighted that he could hardly believe his senses. "The airship? And it has stumbled upon us. Hurrah! We're in luck, Tobalski. There's no more risk for us!"

"Eh, what?" exclaimed the Russian, who was unable to grasp the situation. "What has happened, monsieur?"

"You shall see!" cried the overjoyed Montclair. "Hillo, ho! come down and give us help, will you? I am an American!"

The moment these words were heard on the airship deck, Frank stepped to the rail and shouted:

"All right, keep a stiff upper lip. We'll help you!"

Then down settled the Zenith. It speedily rested upon the snowy plain, not twenty yards away.

Montclair and Tobalski did not scruple to leave the droshky at once and clamber aboard the Zenith.

Then the story was soon told. Frank Reade, Jr., listened with the deepest interest.

"Well," he said, "as it happens, we are just going your way, gentlemen. You are passengers, and welcome. I'll see what I can do to help you."

Montclair was delighted.

"Nothing could have worked better!" he said, jubilantly.

"Then you cabled me, did you?" asked Frank.

"Yes," replied Montclair. "And I was the most disappointed man on earth when I heard that you had gone."

"This is a mighty interesting story you tell," said Frank. "On my word, I am carried away with the project! I'd like to share with you the honor of locating this fragment of Deucalion."

"Frank!" cried Montclair, fairly embracing the young inventor. "You are the best fellow on earth! I knew I could depend on you. You are never wanting in a project of this kind."

CHAPTER V.

THE PLANET IS FOUND.

A few things such as the two scientists required were removed from the droshky. Then it was left to its fate, whatever that might be.

No further thought was given to the Cossacks.

There was no reason for fearing them now. Indeed, they had no further interest in the subject.

The airship again sprang into the air and continued its journey. Pomp prepared a delicious evening meal, of which all partook.

Before the night was spent, Frank had entered wholly into the plans of the two scientists.

"The success of the undertaking is assured," declared Montclair, joyfully. "Fate has been kind to us!"

"Indeed, I can see how arduous an undertaking it was for you," said Frank. "I am glad that I ran across you so opportunely."

"I am afraid our ends would never have been gained," declared Tobalski. "The wolves were rapidly getting the better of us!"

"So, indeed, they were," agreed Montclair.

When daylight came the scene of the night before was many miles away. The country had changed and was vastly more mountainous.

The air was keen and biting, yet Montclair could not leave the deck. He was enraptured with the airship and the opportunities it gave him.

"If I owned this airship," he declared, "I should consider that everything was possible."

Frank laughed at this.

"The airship is not infallible," he said; "yet in many things it is an advantage."

"A great one!"

Day by day now the airship cut down the distance to the latitude reckoned by Tobalski as the spot where the planet had fallen.

As the distance grew less the Russian was much excited and was constantly on deck with his glass studying the horizon.

So one morning he came on deck with an important declaration.

"To-day," he said, "we should see the fragment of Deucalion. What shape it will assume I cannot say, but we are but a few miles from that spot, according to my calculation."

Of course, all were at once on the qui vive.

Montclair and Tobalski paced the deck with glasses, keeping them constantly riveted on the horizon.

And just at the noon hour a distant, irregular line of hills, with one high peak, was seen.

Tobalski gave a regular wild Indian yell.

"Hurrah!" he shouted; "there it is! That distant range of hills is the fallen fragment of the missing planet."

"Do you believe it?" asked Frank Reade, Jr.

"Certainly!"

"Whew!" exclaimed the young inventor. "I should have thought that the fragment striking the earth with such force, would have driven its way half through it."

"By no means," replied Tobalski. "The earth itself is a movable body. Doubtless it acted as a cushion or a spring and thus broke the shock, which for all that must have been tremendous."

"I should say so!"

Nearer the airship now drew to the range of broken hills. And now a most marvelous spectacle was presented to view.

It is not easy to describe it in words. The impression of those on board the airship was that of looking down upon a mighty region rent by some volcanic force

Irregular jagged hills and rocks extended in a scattered way over a vast area.

The forest which had originally occupied this section was crushed and burned to ashes by the fierce heat of the tremendous pile of planetary matter.

The snow had been effaced and as there had been no fall since, the rocks presented themselves bleak and bare. They bore all resemblance to meteoric rocks.

It was a mighty chaos of these fragments, a wonderful, jumbled-up mass with hills and valleys, clefts and passes, dells and hollows among them. It looked like one great volcanic region.

Montclair drew a deep breath as he took it all in, and said:

"Are you disappointed, Tobalski?"

"By no means," replied the Russian. "It is just what I expected."

"But do you expect to find any evidence of animal or vegetable life, as it might have existed on Deucalion, in that pile of fragments?" asked Frank Reade, Jr.

"We cannot expect that unless it may be in either incrusted or fossil form," replied Montclair. "You must understand that the terrible passage of the meteor for so many hundreds of thousands of miles, aye, millions of miles through space, must have heated everything to a white heat and destroyed all matter save the imperishable rock or metals."

"Let us begin research at once," suggested Tobalski. "If we have a fall of snow before many days that will seriously hamper us."

"Agreed," cried Montclair. "Can you kindly set us down, Mr. Reade?"

"Certainly," said Frank, with alacrity. "Lower the ship, Barney."

Down settled the airship. A good landing place was selected in the heart of the volcanic district. So desolate and barren did everything appear to the eye that it was not difficult to imagine oneself in a certain part of a terrestrial Hades.

The two scientists lost no time in getting their tools together and beginning their geological research.

Frank Reade, Jr., was so deeply interested that he joined them. The curious meteoric rocks were carefully examined.

Many of them were in a completely fused state, but there were others which showed plainly their original composition, and showed that they did not differ greatly from the quality of the earth's geological structure.

Carefully the scientists examined the fragments of the fallen planet, applying different tests and recording exactly the results.

So far they had made no discovery to warrant an assumption that Deucalion had ever contained the elements of plant or animal life. Everything was a fused and heterogeneous mass of rock and iron.

But Montclair was the fortunate one to make the first important discovery.

He came to the broken wall of a huge section of fused rock. This showed great seams and fissures and in one of these he found what was plainly the fossil of an animal.

In a moment Tobalski and Frank were at his side and eagerly examining the curious remains. Certainly no creature on earth bore any resemblance to it.

It was a strange object.

In shape it was long and serpentine, with great scales and huge jaws. Eleven claws, with powerful arms, protruded from its sides. No antediluvian reptile of the earth bore any kinship to this monster, which seemed to be fully forty feet in length.

"Whew!" exclaimed Montclair, "if this is a fair specimen of the creatures on Deucalion I would hardly have cared to live there."

"Do you reckon that this creature was alive at the time the planet blew up?" asked Frank.

"By no means," replied Tobalski. "It may be entirely extinct, for you can see that the remains are fossil. It is evidence that Deucalion must have passed through just such different ages of construction as the earth. This creature probably belonged to the tertiary age."

All this was valuable discovery for the ends of science, as Frank could see. A mighty series of facts were proved.

Continuing the research, other indications of fossils were found, but no evidence of possible human beings.

Yet for all this Deucalion might have been inhabited by intelligent people, whose career had ended with the life of the planet. Indeed, it was not by any means an unreasonable supposition, as Tobalski argued.

Thus far the only metal discovered in the fused rocks had been iron. Now, however, Montclair made a find.

He picked up a small fragment of what looked like coal. To his amazement it was extremely weighty.

"Iron!" he muttered, "and yet for the bulk I should say it was far too heavy."

He weighed it reflectively a moment, and then began to chip at it with his geologist's hammer. Some particles yielded and he was given a mighty start. A yellow gleam caught his eye.

The grimy black of the metal was only upon its outside. The interior was far different.

Excitedly he applied the acid test, and then cried:

"Gold, by Jove! Here is gold, Tobalski!"

In a moment the Russian was by his side.

"Gold!" ejaculated the savant. "That is another metal to add to the list."

And he proceeded to jot it down. In that moment he thought not of the intrinsic value of the discovery, but rather of its value to science.

"But only think," cried Montclair, "this solid nugget is worth fully a thousand dollars. If there is more of it——"

The two men exchanged glances.

At this moment Frank came up. Montclair extended the nugget to him.

"Gold!" he said.

The young inventor gave a start. He examined the nugget critically. Then he stooped and picked up another fragment.

"Here is more of it," he said.

"The place is alive with it!"

The three men were intensely excited now. This was certainly a wonderful find. Gold, in huge nuggets, and dropped from another planet.

Who could say how much more of the precious metal was lying loose about the place? Perhaps millions of dollars' worth of it!

Their fortunes were made, to say nothing of the value to science of this discovery.

Much was proved. That the fallen planet had supported animal and possibly human life; that it held minerals in its composition like those of the earth—gold and iron, and as yet remained to be determined, possibly metals of a kind unknown on the earth.

The explorers had good reason to feel not only jubilant but expectant. There was no telling what wonders remained to be revealed.

But for the moment the exploration was cut short by an unlooked-for and thrilling incident.

CHAPTER VI.

A BATTLE OF THE BARBARIANS.

While the trio had been busy exploring the volcanic region, Barney and Pomp had been occupied in duties aboard the airship.

Pomp was at work in the galley, cooking industriously, singing the while, and Barney was polishing the brass railing of the upper deck.

Suddenly the Celt heard a sound in the distance beyond the meteoric deposit which gave him a mighty start.

It was plainly the crack of a rifle.

Instantly the Celt dropped his towel and listened.

"Be me sowl, that's quare," he muttered. "Shure, it sounded loike the report av a gun!"

At this moment Pomp sprang on deck.

"Hi, dar, Pish," he cried, "did yo' hear anyfing?"

"Be me sowl, I did that, naygur."

"Wha' yo' call it, eh?"

"Shure, it was a gun!"

Pomp glanced in the direction of the three explorers. Then he shook his head in a puzzled way.

"Does yo' fink dat we am de only people in dis yer place?" he asked.

"Begorra, phwere wud anybody else cum from?" said Barney. Sure, it's a moighty wilderness!"

Both knew that for fully two days before reaching this point, they had seen absolutely no sign of human life. Yet they had just heard the report of a gun.

It was certain that no animal, to their knowledge, made a cry or call resembling such a sound. There was no mistaking the report.

"Golly, I kin swar I heard a gun fire," said Pomp.

"So kin I."

"Wha' yo' fink ob it?"

"Bejabers, we'd betther investigate," replied Barney, "but first of all, I reckon we'd betther notify Misther Frank."

The words had barely left his lips when both gave another wild start. There was no mistaking the fact.

This time both heard the distant crack of a gun. A moment later another followed. Then a distant fusillade was heard.

This was enough.

"Whurroo!" yelled Barney. "Wud yez cmu back quick, Misther Frank?"

The young inventor heard the distant shout, though he had not heard the report of the guns. At once he started for the airship.

"Come, friends," he said, excitedly. "Something is wrong, we must hasten."

"What is the matter?" cried Tobalski, loth to leave. "Is it serious?"

"Barney would not signal if it was not," replied the young inventor. "I beg of you to come."

Thus adjured, the two scientists followed Frank to the airship. A few moments later they were aboard.

Barney and Pomp were intensely excited. The fusillade in the distance had grown louder, and seemed every moment drawing nearer.

"Who can it be?" cried Montclair, in bewilderment. "Surely some sort of a battle is going on over there!"

"That is true enough," agreed Frank.

"Who are the combatants?"

This was a question not easy to answer. But Frank advanced the idea that they were Cossacks, or natives of the steppes, who were constantly in feud.

That the combat was one to the death there was no doubt. Frank once decided to raise the airship so as to get a view of the battle scene.

But he finally concluded not to do so. It was a most unwelcome interruption to the scientists. It was their fervent wish that the warring tribes would pass on without learning of the presence of the Zenith.

But such was not to be.

Suddenly, and without an instant's warning, they came into view. A part of the combatants were on foot and some on horseback.

Fully a hundred giant men, clad in furs and wielding huge axes and spears, with bows and arrows, were being driven before the guns of a victorious band of mounted Cossacks.

The giants outnumbered the Cossacks three to one, but the agile barbarians of the steppes had the advantage in the character of their weapons.

Two distinct nationalities were here represented, though both were barbarians.

What race these untutored, flaxen-haired giants belonged to none of our adventurers could guess. They looked for all the world like Norsemen.

That they were such might be possible, but in any event the superior weapons of the Cossacks were rapidly decimating them.

In a very short period it was logical to presume that not one of them would stand alive. The arrows and spears did little damage. It looked like a battle of extermination.

And it was this very fact which excited the sympathies of our voyagers.

They did not know but that the giant natives might really be their most deadly foes. But they knew that the Cossacks were.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Montclair, "that is an unfair strife! I don't like to see it so uneven."

"Do you know what those yellow-haired giants are?" asked Frank, turning to Tobalski.

"To tell the truth, I do not," replied the Russian. "There are many tribes and strange races in this part of Asia of which little is known. The attacking party are Cossacks."

"They mean extermination."

"It looks like it."

"We know that the Cossacks are our foes."

"Yes."

"It is likely that these other barbarians are likewise unfriendly. However, if you say the word, I will take their part."

"Begorra, it's only givin' them fair play," cried Barney.

"Golly! it ain't a bit fair fo' dem Cossacks to shoot dem down in dat way," said Pomp.

"It seems to me like a philanthropic move," said Tobalski. "I believe I would do it, Monsieur Reade!"

This settled it.

Frank turned to Barney and Pomp.

"Get your weapons ready," he said; "give it to them!"

No second bidding was needed. In a few moments every man aboard the airship had a Winchester and was pegging away at the Cossacks.

It was to the latter an astonishing intervention.

For a moment they wavered. Met with their own weapons and in the face of what might be superior numbers, they faltered.

Then they made retreat, leaving many of their number dead behind them.

The voyagers had conquered.

"Whurroo!" shouted Barney. "Will we be afther givin' thim chase, Misther Frank?"

"No," replied the young inventor. "Let them go it. They will be hardly likely to do us any further harm."

The yellow-haired giants had seemed stricken with stupor and amazement at the fortunate intervention. They stared at the airship with a mingling of fear and awe.

Then Frank ventured to show himself on the main deck, and made amicable signs.

But these did not seem to reassure the natives. Instead, they fled incontinently into the recesses of the meteoric district.

"Well, I'm beat!" exclaimed Montclair. "They are not very courageous or very grateful."

Everybody laughed at this.

"It is superstition," declared Frank. "After they have recovered from that they will come out and make friends."

"Begorra, I'd loike to know where thim bloody Cossacks went," said Barney.

"Never mind them," said Frank; "they will not trouble us."

"I am not so sure of that," said Montelair. "I am sorry that they have turned up just now. We shall have to be constantly on our guard now while away from the airship."

This was true enough. The Cossacks, or even the other barbarians would be likely to hang about the vicinity, and there was no telling what they might be tempted to do.

Particularly if they learned of the existence of gold in the meteoric district.

But darkness was rapidly shutting down.

Further research was out of the question for that day. So the voyagers made preparations for guarding against a night attack.

It was a moonless night, for the sky was heavily overcast. But the searchlight made a path as light as day across the rock-strewn district.

Until a late hour the voyagers sat up discussing plans for the future. At length Tobalski turned in and Frank and Montelair soon followed.

Barney and Pomp watched alternately. The night, however, passed without incident.

If either the Cossacks or the giants were in the vicinity they did not show themselves.

At an early hour the next day all were astir.

The two scientists were eager to resume the research. Their fears of the night previous were overruled by this desire.

But Frank knew the possibility of danger full well, and said:

"I think it would be well to reconnoiter the vicinity well, first."

"I agree with you there," said Montelair. "Let us do that at once."

"How shall we go to work to do that?" asked Tobalski.

"Easy enough," replied Frank. "I shall sail over the whole district with the airship."

"That will surely accomplish the object," cried the Russian. "Your plan is the best, M. Reade."

"Very well," said Frank; "let us carry it into effect, then."

No time was lost.

The airship was at once allowed to rise three or four hundred feet into the air. A good view of the entire district could be had.

And it was seen that no living being was within the range of vision. Very carefully the airship sailed over the meteoric district.

The Cossacks and the giants were not encamped anywhere in that region. This was reassuring enough and ended all doubt.

"The Cossacks have gone back to the steppes," said Frank, "and the giants have departed for their own land, wherever that is."

"Right," cried Tobalski, with delight; "and that leaves the coast clear for us. Come on, friends, let us lose no further time."

CHAPTER VII.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

Once more the airship descended.

Again the scientists embarked upon their journey of research and exploration. Soon they were deep in it.

This time Frank did not accompany them.

For some unaccountable reason the young inventor felt strangely uneasy. He experienced a curious apprehension.

He felt reasonably sure that there was nothing more to fear from the Cossacks; yet there was the possibility.

He occupied himself for some hours in looking over the machinery and effecting certain repairs. At the noon hour he came on deck.

Pomp had just finished his work in the galley and had a smoking repast ready.

"When am dem gemmens comin' back, Marse Frank?" he asked.

"Why, they ought to be here now," replied the young inventor.

"Bejabers, mebbe they won't come at all," ventured Barney.

"Well, we will wait a reasonable length of time for them," said Frank. "If they are not here in thirty minutes you may serve the lunch, Pomp."

"A'right, sah."

Frank went onto the upper deck and tried to obtain a view of the scientists. They had agreed to come back to the noon meal.

But they were not in sight.

However, Frank felt no keen alarm, for he knew that in their intentness the scientists could easily overlook the lapse of time.

So he delayed the lunch even an hour. Yet the men of science did not come.

"Well," he said, laconically, "they will have an appetite when they do come. We will wait no longer for them."

So he sat down and ate his own lunch. Barney and Pomp did likewise. Then Frank went back to his work on the machinery.

Two o'clock passed and three came. The sun was dropping fast in the western sky.

It seemed certain that the two savants were bound to make a day of it and had no idea of returning until nightfall.

But when four o'clock came Frank began to feel uneasy. He even sought counsel with Barney and Pomp.

"What do you think of it?" he asked. "Ought we not to investigate their absence?"

"Begorra, they'd niver sthop away so long only for a good reason!" declared Barney; "yez kin be sure av that, sor!"

"I am inclined to believe you," declared Frank, "but what can that reason be?"

"Golly! I fink something hab happened to dem!" cried Pomp.

"I've a good mind to go in quest of them."

Barney and Pomp both agreed that this was the best thing that could be done. Thus advised Frank said:

"Take your rifle, Barney, and come with me. Pomp, you can keep a good watch of the airship until I return."

In a jiffy the Celt was ready to accompany his young master. Fully armed the two left the airship.

For a ways they were quite able to follow the trail of the savants. Then the stony nature of the ground forbade this.

For a they kept on at random and finally came to a high barrier made of fragments of the vast meteor.

These were piled up fully one hundred feet high. It was necessary to climb over these.

On the other side was a wide plain strewn with fragments. The moment Frank and Barney descended to this they made a startling discovery.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young inventor; "what object is that yonder? It looks like Montclair's hat."

They reached the spot the next moment. A glance was enough.

It told the story.

It was easy to see that a terrible struggle had taken place. The ground was torn up by heel marks, the butt of a rifle was found, and there were pools of blood everywhere.

"Mither av Moses!" gasped Barney. "Phwativer happened here? It looks as if there'd bin a howly fought Misther Frank!"

"And so there has," said the young inventor, with intense excitement. "And on my honor, I believe that terrible harm has overtaken our friends."

"The Cossacks, sor?"

"It is possible."

Frank bent down and examined the marks of the conflict carefully. He followed a trail for some little ways, and came upon a thrilling discovery.

Three new and roughly made graves. Three men had given up their lives and had here been buried.

Were they a trio of Cossacks, or—with a sickening sense of horror—were they the two scientists, with a victim? For a moment Frank felt sick and faint.

Then he reflected that it was illogical to believe that either of these buried men was one of the scientists. Had one or both been killed, the Cossacks would hardly have gone to the trouble of giving a dead foe burial.

Frank drew a breath of relief.

He was glad to grasp at this ray of hope. He would believe his two friends alive until he knew to the contrary.

They were undoubtedly prisoners in the power of the Cossacks. Frank now proceeded to follow the trail for some distance.

This resulted in another discovery. The spot where the Cossacks had tied their horses was found.

They had galloped away with their prisoners to the southward. Frank knew what this meant.

Far away, below the belt of snow in their own village, they would wreak their revenge upon their captives. Horrible death by slow torture was always their method.

Frank announced this to Barney, who declared:

"Shure, sor, we must be afther goin' to their rescue."

"You are right," agreed Frank. "Back to the airship, Barney! We must lose no time."

And back they went over the high divide and across the fragment-strewn plain. The airship had rested upon a little eminence.

Frank looked for this.

To his amazement the Zenith was not to be seen. Barney gave a sharp cry of surprise.

"Be me sowl!" he cried; "they haven't sthole the airship, too, have they?"

"Where on earth is it?" cried Frank. "We could not have lost our way?"

Then they scanned the sky to make sure that the airship

had not ascended. But they saw it not. Certainly, this was very mysterious.

This was certainly the eminence they had left, and where the airship had been. But as they gained it, a startling sight was revealed to their gaze.

A quarter of a mile away on the other side of the district they saw the airship. What was more, it was receding from them.

Still more, this was not with the aid of the helices. The airship seemed to have a myriad of legs and to be literally walking away.

But a closer view at once showed that each pair of legs belonged to a giant man with yellow hair. A full score of these were carrying the Zenith away bodily.

Astounded beyond all manner of expression, Frank and Barney gazed upon this spectacle.

Frank was the first to speak.

"Well, I never!"

"Shure, it's the giants!"

"They are carrying it away!"

"Bad cess to thim! Phweriver is the naygur?"

"Pomp must have come to harm," declared Frank, "else he would never allow them to do that. It would be easy for him to shake them like flies by sending the airship up into the air."

"Shure, sor, that's thrue."

"We must make a move to recover it ourselves!"

"Will we sthand a show, sor?"

"I think so. If they show us fight we have our Winchesters and they have only bows and arrows."

This was true. So Frank and Barney pressed boldly in pursuit.

They would have speedily called a halt had it not been for a sudden change in the programme of the giants. Suddenly the helices were seen to buzz and the airship to rise.

For a few moments the astonished giants held on to the Zenith, then they were obliged to let go or be carried up into the air.

Such an unexpected denouement evidently paralyzed them. For some moments they were wholly unable to act.

Then with yells of terror they decamped. At the same moment a man appeared at the airship's rail.

It was Pomp.

"Whurroo!" yelled Barney. "It's all safe, Misther Frank. Shure, there's the naygur now."

And Pomp saw them at the same moment. He at once made a signal and the airship came sailing down towards them.

In a few moments Barney and Frank were on board, and the young inventor was listening to Pomp's explanation.

"Bejabers, I reckon it was ashlape at yure post ye was!" declared Barney.

"It was nuffin' ob de sort, sah!" declared Pomp, angrily. "It was mah curiosity, sah. Yes, dat an' nuffin' mo'. I jes' wanted to see if dey cud really carry de airship away on dere shoulders. I knew berry well I cud gib dem de cold fling jes' when I wanted to."

"Well," said Frank; "yours is a powerful curiosity Pomp. Look out that it don't get you into trouble sometime; that is all I say."

With this Frank went into the pilot-house. He at once set the airship's course in pursuit of the Cossacks, who he had good reason to believe were on their way back to their native steppes with their prisoners.

The trail was taken and after leaving the meteoric district it became quite plain in the snow.

There seemed to be fully a hundred Cossacks in the band. They were all mounted.

Across the wide plain the trail led until it finally entered the wooded country to the southward. It was easy enough for the airship to overtake even the fleet horses.

So, just as the day was drawing to a close, Frank descried a distant trail of smoke rising from among the trees.

"That is their camp," he cried. "We shall overtake them, and if we have good fortune will rescue the two prisoners safe and sound."

CHAPTER VIII.

A TIMELY RESCUE.

The airship sailed swiftly over the intervening stretch of forest.

Down deep among the trees was pitched the Cossack camp. They were rough, hardy fellows, and thought nothing of sleeping on the cold ground.

A great fire had been built, and about this they were all gathered. In their line were two men, bound hand and foot.

Montelair and Tobalski had been taken wholly by surprise. The wretches had pounced upon them, and they had but little chance for defense.

Yet they had managed to kill three of the villains. This, however, had done but little good.

It had doubly ensured the certainty of death at the hands of the wild barbarian. They would not fail to avenge their dead comrade.

Bound hand and foot the two captives had been carried many miles that day. They had exhausted every plan for escape.

It was almost impossible to elude the wary and shrewd Cossacks. The outlook was a bad one.

But through all the scientists clung to one hope.

They felt sure that Frank Reade, Jr., would miss them and come to their rescue with his great airship. This they had certainly guessed truly.

So they kept up brave hearts and an outlook for the airship. Yet it did not appear.

Gathered about the campfire the rude Cossacks indulged in rough jests and smoked their pipes serenely. They did not seem to anticipate pursuit.

But suddenly a loud cry was heard from the guard in the wood near. It traveled like wildfire.

It made the blood boil in the veins of our aerial voyagers. They knew that it meant that friends were near at hand.

It brought the Cossacks to their feet in alarm. They flew to arms, but no foe sprung out of the woods, no human being was seen.

But far up in the sky above them was seen the airship. It was swooping down like a monster eagle.

For a moment the stout natives of the steppes were discomfited, even demoralized.

They made no coherent attempt at defense, and one of their number, evidently fearful that they would be cheated out of their revenge, sprung at Montclair and Tobalski with a drawn knife.

He would have plunged the knife into the Russian but for an incident.

Something struck him in the neck, he gave a groan and pitched forward.

The bullet had come from the rifle of Pomp on the deck of the Zenith. The darky had seen the peril of the prisoners just in time, and acted with decision and accuracy.

"Hi-hi!" he shouted. "I done reckon dat heathen was fooled!"

The other Cossacks, hearing no report and seeing the sudden, mysterious death of their comrade, decided upon the supernatural as an explanation.

This drove them into a state of consternation—in fact, a veritable panic. Each one for himself.

Part of them sprang to horse and incontinently fled. The others opened a stubborn fire upon the airship, but this was soon silenced.

A number of the Cossacks lay dead on the field. The rest were quickly put to flight. By judicious firing from the deck, the wretches had been prevented from doing the prisoners harm.

It is hardly necessary to say that both prisoners were delighted at their rescue. The outlook had been a dismal one for them.

But they were soon safely on the deck of the airship, and engaged in telling their story.

"We had just discovered a vein of gold," declared Montclair, "when suddenly dark forms pounced down upon us. We were enabled to fire three fatal shots, then we were made prisoners."

"It is a very fortunate escape for you," declared Frank. "The Cossacks are terrible foes when their revengeful instincts are once aroused."

"Have we seen the last of them?"

"By no means; they are as persistent as can be. They will only leave our trail when we are dead or out of the country."

"Egad!" exclaimed Montclair, "hereafter I'll shoot the first one I see on sight! They are the worst class of wretches I ever knew in my life!"

At this juncture the day came abruptly to a close. Once more night shut down over the country.

It was decided to return to the meteoric district at once. So the airship was headed in that direction.

By the aid of the searchlight their former camping place was found, but the airship did not descend.

Frank decided that it would be safer to remain aloft for a time. So anchors were thrown out at a height of a hundred feet and Pomp remaining on guard, the others turned in for much-needed rest.

The night was as dark as a pocket, not a star showing in the sky. The coon took up his position in the pilot-house, where it was warm.

There was apparently little danger to be apprehended with the airship at that safe distance from the earth. Yet, at an hour past midnight, there gathered a number of dark forms under the airship.

As it was dark shadow there, and the searchlight only made a narrow path in another direction, Pomp failed to see these.

Like weird gnomes in the darkness these shadowy forms flitted back and forth in the night. After a time one of them began to climb up the anchor rope.

Up and up he swiftly and silently went. Then he clambered over the rail and stood on the airship's deck.

It was in deep shadow aft, however, and wholly out

Pomp's range of vision. The darky never dreamed of such a possibility.

The invader gave a shrill, faint whistle, and another figure came up from below.

Another and another followed, and in a short while fully a dozen dark forms were on the deck.

They crouched down in the shadow against the cigar-shaped hull. At this moment the pilot-house door opened and Pomp came out.

It was customary to make the rounds of the deck every hour, and this was now the coon's purpose. He was wholly unsuspecting danger and carelessly walked aft.

He almost brushed against the crouching figures in the shadow. He was looking over the airship's rail.

Suddenly lithe forms sprang up about him. A cry of alarm was on his lips, but before it could be uttered talon fingers clutched his windpipe.

Pomp made a desperate effort to throw off his assailants, but ere he could do so he was borne to the deck, a gag thrust into his mouth and he was securely bound.

Fearful horror filled the bosom of the negro.

Too late he regretted his incaution. He thought of the others. How could he give them warning?

There was no possible way.

The Cossacks, for such they were, flitted across the deck and glided into the pilot-house. They looked it over silently, then began to go through the ship.

Down into the cabin they glided, and, of course, came to the staterooms. Frank Reade, Jr., was in the first one, sound asleep.

Swiftly he was overpowered and silently bound; Montclair and Tobalski the same. Barney was awakened and let out a yell of warning, but it was too late.

In a trice the entire company of the airship were thus made prisoners by their foes, and the airship was at their mercy.

It was all like a horrible dream, and the voyagers could hardly bring themselves to realize the situation. As for the triumphant Cossacks, they ransacked the airship and made the night hideous with their yells.

It was a turning of tables of a most unwelcome sort, and the voyagers could hardly bring themselves to believe it.

Now that the airship was captured, the gags were removed from the prisoners' mouths and they were all thrown into the after cabin and the door closed upon them.

Here they were left to most painful reflections while the Cossacks proceeded to make themselves at home on board.

"Well, this is a scrape!" groaned Montclair. "We are done for!"

"Begorra, howiver did they get onto the airship?" asked Barney.

Poor Pomp could only groan.

"I don' see how dey eber did it," he said. "I was watchin' all de time, but I done reckon dey climb up de anchor rope!"

"If we could only reason with the wretches," said Frank, "but I do not know their language."

"I do," said Tobalski, promptly. "And I recognized one of their number as they were binding me. I think his name is Stoken Pelekarchy, and he was at one time one of the Imperial Guard at Moscow and in the Czar's service. If so, he is a merciless villain and a pirate. We shall fare hard at his hands."

"But what can they do with the airship?" said Frank; "they can never operate it themselves."

"That is true, but they may decide to destroy it."

"Then our fate is sealed," declared Montclair. "This is the worst calamity that could have befallen us. What is the matter now?"

The airship suddenly began to sway and swing. Frank guessed the meaning of it at once.

"They are trying to pull it down to the earth," he said. "They will have a hard tussle so long as the helices turn."

For some while the airship continued its motion. Then suddenly the door of the cabin opened.

A savage, low-browed fellow stood on the threshold. He glared at the prisoners and then singled out Tobalski.

"Is not your name Sergius Tobalski?" he asked, in Russian.

"It is," replied the scientist, "and you are Stoken Pelekarchy."

"You know me?"

"I do."

"Then you know what my commands mean. I want you to show me how to sail this ship of the air. If you refuse, you die!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE TABLES TURNED.

Tobalski gazed coolly at the villain and replied:

"I refuse!"

A deep hiss escaped the Cossack chief's lips, and he took a quick step forward. A knife flashed in his hand. He placed this at Tobalski's throat.

"Once more," he hoarsely said, "do not refuse!"

The scientist returned his fierce gaze so calmly that the fellow's wrath was for a moment turned.

"I cannot," replied Tobalski. "I do not know how!"

"You lie!"

"It is true; this airship belongs to the American yonder. It is not in my power to sail it."

Pelekarchy's eyes glittered.

He turned and glared at Frank Reade, Jr.

"You shall do my bidding," he said, savagely.

"He speaks not your tongue."

"Then tell him!"

With this Tobalski interpreted the words to Frank.

"Tell him that if he will agree to do us no harm and cut our bonds I will sail the airship for him," then, sotto voce, "if he agrees to this you shall see how I will outwit him!"

"Good!" said Tobalski. Then he interpreted Frank's reply. There was a crafty gleam in Pelekarchy's eye.

"I will release him first," he said, cunningly; "then if he obeys me faithfully I will set the rest of you free."

Tobalski communicated this to Frank, who replied:

"Tell him we accept the terms."

The Russian scientist did this. The Cossack leaned forward and cut Frank's bonds.

"Follow me," he said, tersely.

But before the young inventor could gain his feet a startling thing happened.

The airship gave a sudden mad leap. Then there was a gliding sensation.

A Cossack oath pealed from Pelekarchy's lips and he sprang out of the cabin.

"What has happened?" cried Montclair.

"The anchor cable has parted!" shouted Frank, "and the airship is flying upward. Either they have cut it purposely or it has parted accidentally."

"What will be the result?" asked Montclair, breathlessly.

"We will go clear into space unless the speed of the airship is checked," said Frank. "That will mean death to all of us."

"Something must be done," cried Tobalski. "You are free, Monsieur Reade!"

"Why, of course," cried the young inventor. "We are losing time. Oh, for a knife!"

Fortunately the young inventor felt in an inner pocket and drew out a clasp-knife.

It took but a moment for him to unclasp this, and quick as a flash he cut the bonds of his companions.

Every man was instantly on his feet.

Pelekarchy had rushed on deck, and in his paroxysm of rage at the folly of his companions in cutting the cable, had forgotten the prisoners in the cabin.

Frank Reade, Jr., glided into the forward cabin followed by the other voyagers. Here was a stand of small arms. Each possessed himself of a loaded repeater.

At this moment Pelekarchy was seen coming toward the cabin.

"Shall I drop him?" whispered Montclair, raising his rifle.

"Yes," replied Frank; "shoot him in the leg; don't kill him!"

Crack!

With a yell of agony the Cossack leader fell. Instantly his companions made a rush for the cabin.

But they were met with a deadly fire. Frank sprung up into the pilot-house and pressed a key which closed every door and window on board.

The aerial voyagers had the best of the bargain. All of the Cossacks were out on the deck.

They hurled themselves against the cabin door, but it did not yield. A murderous fire was opened upon them by Barney and Pomp from portholes in the upper cabin.

They could have been all exterminated then and there, but Frank instructed Tobalski to hail them.

"Surrender and your lives will be spared!"

A moment only the Cossacks hesitated. Then they threw up their arms.

Frank reversed the lever and the airship began to sink. She was now a number of miles northward of the meteoric district.

Soon the searchlight showed the white snow-plain beneath, and the airship settled down upon it. Then the Russian savant shouted sternly:

"Stoken Pelekarchy, be off with you! Your conduct shall be reported to the Russian government, and woe to you if you ever return across the Siberian border!"

A shower of Cossack curses escaped the wretch's lips. Then he was carried from the airship's deck by his companions.

The Cossacks removed their wounded and slain and then Frank sent the airship up again.

This time he allowed it to rise far above the earth and proceeded to wait for dawn. There was no more sleep for the voyagers that night.

All that they could find to do was to discuss the affair. It had taught them a serious lesson.

"The way we are going on our research will be of little value," declared Montclair. "Indeed, it is not going to be safe to conduct it."

"Well, that is rather our misfortune than a fault," replied Frank. "However, I think I can arrange it so that all will be safer."

Daylight came at last. The airship had drifted about twenty miles to the north.

But this distance was speedily covered and soon the region of the debris from the fallen planet again came into view.

"There is one thing about it," declared Tobalski, studying the sky. "We have got to do our work within a very few days or not at all."

"How so?" asked Montclair.

"Well, it is about time for the Siberian winter to set in. This region will be covered with snow at times twenty feet deep. Very little research we could conduct then."

"Whew!" exclaimed Montclair, in dismay. "It looks as if our trip was to be a failure, and all on account of those confounded Cossacks."

"Not a bit of it," put in Frank. "How much more time do you require to complete your research?"

"We ought to have a week!"

"On a pinch two days would do," said Montclair.

"That is enough," declared Frank. "I will guarantee you safety for that length of time."

"How are you going to do that?" asked Tobalski.

"I will patrol this region with the airship and hunt out every Cossack who ventures to invade it!"

"Why!" cried Montclair, joyously, "that would make us perfectly safe."

"I think so," replied Frank. "so go ahead with your work. I will see that you are protected."

This happy solution of the problem infused new courage in the bosoms of the two scientists. They at once descended and began their research again.

Frank sent the airship up a thousand feet. He and Barney were constantly at the rail studying the country below.

Half the day passed, and not a Cossack or other foe appeared. The scientists worked successfully below.

They had amassed an immense number of valuable specimens, and had settled many important facts regarding the structure of the fallen planet. As Montclair had said, another day would end the task.

But as the airship lazily sailed around in a circle above them Barney suddenly called Frank's attention to a scene below.

"Bejabers!" cried the Celt, "kin yez see anything off there to the southward, Mister Frank?"

Frank turned his gaze in that direction and gave a start. A long black line extended along the horizon.

It was a wavering line, and seemed to be approaching. Frank procured his strongest glass and fell to studying the phenomenon.

And as revealed by the glass he saw columns of men and horses. It was a vast army sweeping across the plain.

There were thousands in that army, and as the voyagers continued to gaze upon it, Frank exclaimed:

"Can they be Cossacks?"

"Bejabers, I'll be afther thinking it's that same," cried Barney. "And sure they're comin' to give us a good batin'."

As it would be hours before the distant concourse could reach the spot, Frank did not at once descend or communicate with the two scientists.

But when the great columns were within eight or ten miles then he lowered the airship and fired the signal gun.

Montclair and Tobalski responded at once.

"What is the matter?" asked the American. "Is it the Cossacks?"

"That I cannot say," replied Frank, "but a vast concourse of men and horses are approaching from the south."

"Then it is the work of Stoken Pelekarchy!" declared Tobalski. "He has aroused the whole Cossack nation. Our work is at an end."

"Do you believe it?" asked Montclair.

"There is little more chance for us," said the Russian.

"Then we had better get what specimens we can aboard the airship and abandon the project."

"Until another summer," said Tobalski; "then we can come here and reap a mighty fortune."

"It shall be as you gentlemen say," said Frank.

So it was decided.

No time was lost in getting the specimens aboard the airship. Then Frank sent the airship aloft, just as the advance guard of the army entered the meteoric region.

Up sprang the Zenith to a height of a thousand feet. The vast army halted in sheer amazement at the spectacle.

And as the voyagers took in the scene below, Tobalski cried in surprise:

"What! These are not Cossacks, but Tartars from Kirghiz and the south!"

CHAPTER X.

THE TARTAR.

This declaration of the Russian scientist was an astonishing one.

"Tartars!" exclaimed Frank Reade, Jr., in amazement. "What are they doing so far from their own land?"

Tobalski could not answer this question, but he said:

"I will try and find out. I have a smattering of the Tartar tongue."

Meanwhile the vast army below was in a state of partial panic. The sight of the airship was the cause of this.

To them it was a wonderful and inexplicable phenomenon. It was, of course, the first time they had ever seen an airship, and doubtless many of them had never seen a ship of any kind.

Very likely they took the Zenith for a huge bird. However this was, they at once opened fire upon it.

The bullets pattered against the airship's hull like rain, but did no harm.

Frank kept the Zenith sailing around in a circle, nearing the earth gradually. Finally, finding it had no effect, the Tartars ceased firing.

Then Tobalski approached the rail as near as he dared to, and shouted in the Tartar tongue:

"We are friends! Why fire at us? Let your leader give us speech!"

At this, superstitious terror seemed to seize upon the natives. Many of them flung themselves upon their faces.

"Humph!" said Montelair; "I don't see how you are going to do anything with such people."

"We shall see," said Tobalski, and he hailed the Tartars again.

After awhile he managed to convince them that it was no spirit of the air or other unearthly creation addressing them. Then one of them made answer:

"Who are you that can float in the air? This is only the power of Brahma or the Prophet Mahomet."

"It is our power also and we are only human beings like you. But who is your leader?"

"The most noble Hooly Khan," was the reply.

Tobalski gave a sharp cry.

"Why, he was my friend once when I was in Thibet. Listen, Hooly Khan, do you not remember the Russian, Sergius Tobalski?"

A great cry went up from below. Then a loud voice shouted:

"If thou art Sergius Tobalski, come down and show thyself! Thou hast nothing to fear from Hooly Khan!"

"Good!" cried Tobalski, turning to his friends. "We are all right. These Tartars are our friends. I know Huli, or Hooly Khan, as a brother. Let us go down to them."

"You don't say!" cried Montelair.

Frank looked incredulous.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You know that much depends."

"I am very sure," declared Tobalski positively. "Have no fear, Monsieur Reade."

"All right," said Frank.

Then he turned to Barney.

"Lower the ship."

Down settled the Zenith, right among the wondering Tartars. Tobalski stood on the deck in full view and waved recognition to the chief of the Asiatic warriors, Hooly Khan.

It was a remarkable development. When the Tartars had first appeared, Frank had been sure that they were foes.

It was a pleasant disappointment.

As the airship rested finally upon the ground, our adventurers were enabled to see through the pilot-house windows as wild and savage-looking barbarians as it had ever been their fate to look upon.

The Cossacks were not in the same class with these fellows. Fierce and untamed they looked.

But they offered no violence. The word of their swarthy leader, Huli Khan, was sufficient to ensure obedience.

In a moment Tobalski sprung down and embraced the Tartar chief. As he had declared they were truly great friends.

Then after some excited conversation, which seemed to be a series of explanations on the Russian's part, the Tartar leader came to the rail of the airship.

The other voyagers came out and were introduced to him. Huli Khan's manner was very friendly.

Then Frank and Tobalski showed him over the airship, explaining as well as they could its mechanism. The Tartar chief was much impressed.

As interpreted by Tobalski, he said:

"I have heard of you Americans at Constantinople. You are a very wonderful people. Your ship is a strange and marvelous thing!"

"If you wish I will give you a short flight in the clouds," offered Frank.

But the Khan declined, nervously, evidently fearing the departure from the earth. He was not really comfortable until he was again among his followers.

But there was no longer any risk. The Tartars were the friends of our voyagers.

When told of the attacks of the Cossacks, Huli Khan grinned broadly, and declared:

"I pray Mahomet to give us a chance at the dogs. My men would eat them up in a trice!"

A short while later Tobalski came back aboard the airship, and then Frank asked:

"How is this? What has brought the Khan and his people up into this far northern country?"

The Russian's reply was surprising.

"The same thing that brought us!" he declared.

"What!" exclaimed Frank. "The fallen planet?"

"Just so!"

"How is that?

"Well, the story as Huli Khan tells it is just this: The fall of the fragment of Deucalion was seen by the Khan and certain wise men of his tribe. The latter declared that it was a message from heaven, and that certain magic talismans would be found where it fell. So the Khan calls together his army and starts on the journey for the spot where it fell. How they ever found their way here I cannot conceive, but it is likely that they took a straight line and kept to it most faithfully. They have been months journeying over the steppes and part of the way were obliged to give battle to opposing tribes."

"This is quite wonderful!" declared Frank. "I trust the Khan is not disappointed?"

"Oh, I think not," replied the Russian savant. "I think he is inclined to take the sayings of his wise men always with a grain of salt."

"I don't blame him."

The day was rapidly drawing to a close. The air had blown up a chill northerly wind and the sky was a leaden hue.

Finally there came slight bits of snowflakes. Tobalski, who was more familiar with the climate, shook his head ominously.

"It looks like what the Esquimaux call a chinook," he said. "I am afraid it will be a bad one."

The Tartars were rapidly making camp. Soon the plain was a small city of tents of skin and poles. These were fairly impervious to the cold.

When darkness came, the storm had increased to a driving gale. Frank folded the helices and prepared to spend the night on the surface, for it would be folly to go aloft.

The Tartars made fires and gathered in their tents. Then intense darkness shut down.

That night was one never forgotten by any in the party. How the wind did roar from the north! How the snow did blow and drift! It was a fearful tempest.

When daybreak came, Pomp, who was on guard in the pilot house, could not see out of the windows. He scrayed to step out on deck.

But the doorway was solidly blocked with the snow. It required but a brief investigation to reveal a most startling fact.

The airship was literally buried in a mighty drift of the white element. The air even became close and stifling in the cabin.

When the rest of the party turned out they were amazed. But Tobalski rubbed his hands and said:

"There is no use in our staying in this country longer. This snow will not lift for six months or more."

"Indeed!" said Frank. "Are you sure we can get away?"

"We must dig our way out," said Tobalski. "It must be done before there comes the great freeze, else we may have to stay."

"Enough!" cried Frank. "Get shovels, everybody, and to work—we must lose no time!"

"But what of the Tartars?" asked Montclair.

"They are all right," declared Tobalski. "They have plenty of provisions with them, and they are great hunters. They could live under the snow for an indefinite period."

The cabin door was thrown open and a tunnel was begun.

As the snow was light and feathery, it was easily pressed aside and packed, so that a small tunnel was made through it to the surface.

Only the upper part of the airship's masts and helices were above the great drift. The scene was an Arctic one on all hands.

The Tartar encampment was almost entirely buried, but in a few places tent-poles were seen sticking up, and the faint columns of smoke arose.

Some of the Tartars had emerged on snowshoes. These now paid a visit to the airship.

Work was begun at once at the excavating of the airship. Barney and Pomp worked assiduously.

Meanwhile the Tartars were also busy. Later on, Huli Khan paid a visit to the airship.

He then informed Tobalski of his intention to remain all winter on the spot. He felt sure that he would find the magic talismans in the spring.

"And so he will," declared Tobalski to Frank. "He will find the deposits of gold. We have removed all of value that we ever shall from the remains of the fallen planet."

"Then why remain here longer?" asked Frank. "At least let us go further south, where it is not so cold."

"By all means," agreed the Russian. "We can find our way back to St. Petersburg if you leave us at a Russian port. Eh, Monsieur Montclair?"

"I think so," replied the latter.

But Frank snapped his fingers.

"You misjudge me!" he said. "I have no idea of leaving you in the lurch in such a manner. I have cast my fortunes with yours, and I mean to follow them to the end."

CHAPTER XI.

OUT OF THE SNOW

"Pardon me, Monsieur Reade," said the Russian, "I understand that you would continue your journey around the world."

"If I do, I will first see that you and Mr. Montclair are safely landed at St. Petersburg," declared Frank.

"Which is very kind of you," declared Montclair. "We shall endeavor to repay you in some fashion."

"Pshaw!" said Frank, impatiently. "We are not sure of getting out of this scrape as yet."

"I have an idea," said Montclair.

"What?"

"Hire half a hundred or more of the Tartars to dig the airship out. They could do it."

"A good scheme," cried Tobalski. "Let us go over and see the Khan about it."

As there were several pairs of snowshoes on board, the three men set out over the snowy surface. They were soon among the Tartar tents.

Only the tops of these could be seen. The Tartars had seemed to make no effort to dig them out. This was soon explained.

An opening in the snow drifts was found, and through this the aerial voyagers descended into one of the tents. Then it was seen that the Tartars were all making tunnels from one tent to another.

"We do not want to dig away the snow," said one of them in explanation; "it keeps us warm, and we can live down here far more comfortable than on the surface."

"Well," declared Montclair, "there is certainly logic in their methods. The atmosphere down here is many degrees warmer, I must say."

It was a veritable city under the snow and an interesting spectacle to the voyagers.

From one tent to another was a tunnel. These were practically avenues of passage for general use, so that anybody could go from one part of the encampment to another.

There was sufficient light through the tent roofs, and air was easily obtained through the porous walls, while the deadly chill wind was cut off effectually.

That the snow had come to stay there was no doubt. There would be other storms to keep the supply up.

Unless they should run short of provisions, truly the Tartars were well off until spring should come to release them from their icy camp.

Huli Khan very gladly deputed a half hundred men to dig the airship out.

They were soon at work and made the snow fly. Great drifts, fifty feet in height, arose on each side.

Down to the deck of the airship they went. Relieved of this load, Frank believed that the airship could extricate itself.

But as he turned on the electric current he was astonished to find that the helices would not work. However, it was easy enough to understand this.

They were frozen up!

A live wire, however, soon thawed them out, amid hissing clouds of steam.

Then Frank put on all force. The airship swayed and creaked and slowly arose.

Up out of the snowy depths it went. Then Frank held it a few feet in elevation and paid the Tartar workmen in gold for their services. Then farewell was said to Huli Khan.

This done, the airship sprung up into the frosty air.

The cold was intense.

But the electric system of heating aboard the Zenith quickly made the interior of the ship comfortable. But the thermometer on the outside of the pilot-house showed that the temperature was thirty degrees below zero.

This was cold enough for all.

"Ugh!" said Montclair, "let us seek a warmer clime as quickly as we can. We shall perish here."

"Southward we go!" declared Frank. "Then we will strike westward to Moscow, or where you may please to go."

"I should prefer the Observatory of Marchetsky," replied Tobalski, "if it would be as easy for you to go there."

"Certainly," replied Frank; "it shall be Marchetsky."

The airship did not speed through the air as freely as its wont. The frost seemed to have affected the machinery, for the helice shafts creaked and groaned and the ship rose unsteadily.

Southward the course was set. As far as the eye could reach glittered the dazzling snow-fields.

Frank knew that a flight of five hundred miles would

hardly take them beyond this, and fully two hundred miles more would only bring them to moderate climate.

So he crowded speed on the propeller, for there was no telling when another storm might come up.

The airship boomed along for two hundred miles in good shape. This brought them to another day, and a series of somewhat thrilling incidents.

The Zenith was booming along at a lively pace when a range of hills was approached. Frank did not raise the airship as he calculated it would clear the summits of these by fully a hundred feet.

At that moment Pomp was aft, engaged in oiling the shaft of the propeller. He had finished his task and was about to step across the narrow platform connecting with the main deck, when a catastrophe occurred.

There was ice upon this, and as his feet touched it, he slipped and fell. He made a mad clutch at the railing and missed it.

The next moment he was in midair and journeying toward the earth.

A wild cry for help pealed from his lips.

But it was unheard. Barney was down in the engine room and Frank was in the pilot-house.

Pomp fell over one hundred feet to the earth. Only one fact saved his life.

This was that a crevice in the hills was filled with soft, feathery snow. Into this he shot. It broke his fall, and he was practically unhurt.

But when he scrambled out the airship was but a speck in the distance. A fearful chill of horror seized him.

"Massa Lordy!" he groaned, "dey won' miss me, p'raps, fo' hours. Den dey nebber fin' me. Dis chile am a goner!"

He clambered up the snowy steep to the verge of a clump of pines. Just as he reached these a startling thing occurred.

A low growl sounded at his right and from a cavity in the hillside a huge, shaggy form crept out. It was a specimen of Siberian bear, an animal much dreaded by the Asiatic traveler.

He was a giant of his species, and towering on his hind legs came straight for Pomp.

Now, if there is one thing in the world a coon is afraid of it is a bear. Pomp was no exception.

His wool fairly stood on end. For a moment he was paralyzed with terror.

Then he gave a loud yell.

"Fo' de lan's sake, dis chile am a goner fo' sah. Nebber git out ob here alibe. Oh, Massy Lordy, wha' I gwine to do?"

Of course, his first thought was retreat. So he made his way full tilt along the verge of the pine forest. The bear followed.

Then Pomp adopted the old and time-honored plan of climbing a tree. He selected a huge pine, and the way he scaled it was a caution to monkeys.

He never paused until he had made his way almost up to the top. Here he had begun to fancy himself safe, when, to his horror, he saw that the bear had adopted the same tactics.

He was of a species which climb trees, and Pomp had made a mistake in selecting a large tree. If he had climbed up one of less girth the bear could not have followed him.

The coon was now all profuse perspiration with awful terror.

"Fo' de lan's sake, he's gwine to cotch me sure!" he muttered. "Wha' de debbil dis chile do?"

Up came the bear, laboriously. Then Pomp had a happy thought.

He remembered that he had a revolver in an inner pocket. This he drew out and was glad to find that it was loaded.

The bear had come slowly up and was just half a dozen feet below. His little, pig-like eyes were fixed upon his prey, and he snapped his teeth like castanets.

"I fix yo', sah," muttered the darky, as he cocked the weapon. "Git down dar, yo' ornery critter!"

With which he pulled the trigger. The bullet, however, glanced from the bear's thick skull like a pea. The creature shook his head and growled, but this was all.

Again Pomp fired. He tried to put a shot into the animal's eye. But he did not succeed.

He emptied the pistol into the animal's body, but it had no effect. The bear came nearer, growling savagely.

He was now within four feet of the darky's limbs. Pomp however, retreated out upon a long limb of the tree.

And here he was safe.

The big brute did not venture out upon this. He, however, ensconced himself in a fork of the tree and glared at his prey in a wolfish and determined way. The situation was by no means a pleasant one, and Pomp prayed earnestly for the airship to return to his rescue.

CHAPTER XII.

HOMEWARD BOUND—THE END.

Strangely enough, Pomp was not missed for hours—not until the evening meal hour came

Then Frank came on deck to say:

"Where is Pomp?"

"Bejabers, I was just thinkin' av him mesiff, sor!" declared Barney. "Shure, sor, he ought to be in the cookroom at this toime."

"Well, he is not," declared the young inventor. "I have just come from there. Look him up, Barney."

"All roight, sor."

The Celt at once began the search. He went to every part of the airship.

Then he came into the cabin, with white and scared face.

"Be me sowl, Misther Frank," he declared, "I can't foind him anywhere on the ship."

Frank sprung to his feet. He was now alarmed.

"Make another search," he cried. "He must must be on board. Leave nothing undone. Something has befallen him!"

Montclair and Tobalski now joined in the quest. Every part of the airship was searched.

But Pomp could not be found.

Inquiry developed the fact that he had last been engaged in oiling the propeller shaft.

"That settles it," declared Frank, with horrified face; "he has fallen overboard!"

The airship was at once put about. It seemed like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Moreover, there was good reason to fear that Pomp's fall had in itself proven fatal, and that only his lifeless body could be found.

Darkness shut down and the searchlight was brought into requisition. There was no delay in the quest, for there was fear that the darky might perish of cold, if indeed he was alive.

At that very moment the coon and the bear were holding a most uncomfortable tete-a-tete in the lofty branches of the big pine. The cold was intense, and the darky's veins were congealing with it, but his terror of the bear aided in keeping his blood up to almost adequate temperature.

The situation was by no means a comic one to Pomp. The poor negro clung to his perch, while the darkness shut down intensely.

Almost within reach of him was the bear. The monster's eyes now shone like azure balls of fire, and Pomp was getting stiff and numb in his very cramped position.

A number of times he had come near falling.

"Massy Lordy! he be sure fo' to get me 'fore mornin'," he muttered, dismally. "Oh, good Lor', send de Prophet 'Lijah to kill de drefful bear an' sabe dis chile."

Then Pomp half decided to drop to the ground and trust to his legs. But he distrusted his ability to use them in his exhausted state.

So he still clung to his perch. The bear seemed comfortable and provokingly patient, evidently feeling sure of an ultimate meal.

Thus the hours drifted by. At intervals Pomp would scan the sky in the faint hope that the airship might be seen.

And just when he seemed to feel his arms slowly freezing to the branch about which he clung, a sharp cry of joy pealed from his lips.

"T'ank de Lor', dere it am! Oh, whoop-la! It am coming to sabe me! Marse Frank he neber fo'get dis chile! I'se gwine to git out a'right yet!"

Then he shouted with all his might. Far in the distant sky he saw a ball of intensely brilliant light. It made a prismatic pathway through the gloom.

"Dat am de searchlight," he muttered. "Oh, dey's comin' fo' to fin' me! Hi, dar, Mistah Bear, yo' bettah look out fo' yo' skin now!"

And in his state of exhaustion Pomp's mind began to wander. A strange exhilaration was upon him.

He was almost tempted to try conclusions with Bruin, so exalted was his courage. Then came the natural reaction and a deadly sense of fear.

What if they should fail to locate him? What if they should pass him by, as the ship does the drifting sailor on a dark night?

Awful horror came upon him. Faintness crept over him. He tried to shout, but his tongue rattled in his throat.

"Oh, Massy Lordy!" he groaned, "dere ain't no help fo' dis chile! He am done fo'! Dey neber kin see me!"

But Barney on board the Zenith had been working the searchlight with great care.

Slowly the airship had crept along. The searchlight swept every foot of the plain and even the smallest object was carefully inspected.

So that as the Zenith passed over the ridge, Frank shouted:

"Do you see anything down there, Barney? It looks to me like tracks in the snow!"

The Celt was not slow to turn on the dark marks. Then the airship settled down.

There in the snow were plainly seen the marks of Pomp's fall. The mystery of his disappearance was explained. But where was he?

Was his body lying down there, frozen stiff? A terrible fear seized the voyagers.

"Lower the airship, Barney!" commanded Frank; "we must make a search."

Down went the Zenith and rested in the snow. Then Frank and Montclair sprang over the rail.

Up the little slope they followed the trail, and then they came to the bear tracks. A comprehension of all burst upon Frank, and also the fear that the brute had overmastered the darky.

But he pressed on and came to the foot of the tree. He glanced upward and saw the huge form of the bear in the fork above. Then out on the limb he saw a lesser form.

"Pomp!" shouted Frank.

Something like a husky groan was heard in reply. Then down through the branches crashed a dark body. Fortunately the soft snow broke his fall and the darky was uninjured.

But he could not speak as Frank and Barney picked him up and carried him to the deck of the airship. The bear came sliding down the tree trunk and vanished in the darkness.

It was hours before Pomp quite recovered himself. But it was days ere he entirely recovered his strength.

"Begorra, if that bear had iver got his jaws on yez, naygur," said Barney, with an ironical grin, "there wud have been nuthin' left but a grease spot in the snow."

"Huh! I done reckon if yo' had bin in mah place yo' wud hab los' a year's growth, sah," said Pomp, contemptuously. "Yo' ain't got no mo' courage den any oder man."

"Pomp certainly did display a great amount of nerve," declared Frank, "the odds were against him."

This tickled the darky's vanity greatly. Barney scratched his head and made a grimace.

The airship was quickly on its way again. Montclair kindly offered to do watch duty with Barney that night.

The next morning the Zenith was fully a hundred miles on her southern course. Already the cold had begun to lessen, and there were signs of entering a more temperate clime.

The spirits of all in the party were correspondingly lifted. Montclair and Tobalski were especially in an exuberant frame of mind.

The trip had been a comparative success. They had actually discovered the mighty aerolite or fragment of a fallen planet, and, in this, they had established many facts of profound value to science.

The mooted theories of centuries were settled. More had been disclosed than would have been possible with the most powerful glass ever constructed.

"What do you think became of the rest of the fallen planet?" asked Frank Reade, Jr.

"We can only theorize," replied Tobalski. "It is logical, to assume, however, that it was dissipated into space in the form of fragments. Many of these may have fallen upon other planets or still be traveling in space in the shape of aerolites."

"I suppose this fragment which fell upon the earth was but a very small piece of Deucalion?"

"A very infinitesimal piece," replied Tobalski. "Perhaps the other planets were visited by larger fragments."

"It is quite wonderful."

"That is true."

"What would be the effect upon other planets or the system of the firmament altogether, should the earth go to pieces like that?"

"It would have but slightly greater effect than the dissolution of Deucalion."

"Then the sun, nor the moon, nor any other heavenly bodies would not suffer?"

"Not the slightest."

"Humph! We can now realize what a mite in space is the earth which to us is so vast and unwieldy."

"Very true. And comparatively, how insignificant is the human being. A very atom, a mote, yet possessed of a spirit which can embrace all these marvelous wonders. Truly, who can ever hope to fathom the mystery of being?"

"It will never be fathomed by man."

"That is quite clear."

Three days were consumed in making the five hundred mile strike to the south. Then a consultation was held.

"We are not yet out of Siberia," said Frank. "Do you gentlemen wish to pursue your research further?"

"No," replied Tobalski; "I am satisfied. You can leave us at any Russian outpost, Monsieur Reade. How we shall ever repay you I cannot say."

"Nor I," added Montclair.

"Where do you propose to go?" asked Frank; "to St. Petersburg, to Moscow or to Valdai Observatory?"

"To the observatory."

"Very well," said the young inventor; "I will take you there."

"Monsieur Reade," protested the Russian, "we ask too much."

"Not at all; it will be a pleasure to me."

"But you are bound around the world?"

"Not necessarily; I can make that trip some other time. Indeed, I fear the Zenith would hardly stand the strain of so long a trip, as she is a bit out of repair. I will take my time in a trip over England and Scotland."

Of course, the scientists were delighted. Two weeks later they were safely landed at Valdai.

Here they disembarked with their specimens, and were welcomed by their brother scientists, who came post haste from Paris.

They had been waiting eagerly for news from Tobalski and Montclair, and had almost given them up for lost.

"Of course, we never dreamed of such luck as your falling in with Mr. Reade and his airship," declared Von Ardhen, the Austrian.

"But for him," declared Tobalski, "we should never have accomplished the trip, or indeed have returned alive."

"You do me too great an honor, gentlemen," protested Frank.

"Not by any means," cried Castellar; "You shall be tendered a membership in the World's society. What say you, friends?"

Loud cheers followed. Then some gratifying proceedings followed.

In the great rooms of the Observatory a long table was spread. Every hour brought more distinguished men.

A great banquet was held, at which hundreds of noted scientists were present, and all in honor of Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp.

They were feted and dined and treated like princes during their stay at Marchetsky.

The news, of course, had traveled fast and furious. One mail brought an autograph letter from the Czar thanking the American inventor and bestowing upon him the gold medal of the Russian Society.

Another brought word from the German Emperor and Victor Emanuel of Italy also added his testimonial as well as the French President.

Surely this was sufficient recompense, and Frank was quite overwhelmed.

But he was Frank Reade, Jr., through it all, and never lost his identity as an American, remaining quiet and dignified and maintaining the same favorable impression.

When the airship finally sailed from the Observatory the aerial voyagers could say that they had been honored as few Americans had ever been before. And they were happy.

The Zenith could have stopped in Moscow, in Prague, Berlin and Paris and been feted all the way. But Frank was averse to this.

He very gracefully declined all invitations of the sort, and speeding away across the British Channel was soon over England.

He had thought of stopping at some points in the British Isles, but now that his fame had been so heralded he stood in dread of the reception which he would get, for he was much averse to public display.

So he changed his plans.

"Phwat are yez goin' to do, Misther Frank?" asked Barney.

"I am going home," replied Frank.

"To Readestown, sor?"

"As straight as I can."

Barney stood on his head with sheer delight.

"Shure, I'm glad av that, sor," he cried; "thim foine gintlemin wud have turned me head wid their compliments in another day, sor."

So the Zenith was headed across the Atlantic. One fine morning she sailed over Long Island and into New York State.

When Readestown was reached, however, there was an ovation which the voyagers could not escape.

Thousands of friends gathered to welcome the return of the Zenith, and Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp were the heroes of the hour.

The trip of the Zenith had been a complete success. Much perilous adventure had been encountered, but our voyagers had returned safely.

At present they are in Readestown, and while Frank has no new plans outlined, it is likely that he will ere long start out on another trip.

The author promises to be on the lookout, and at the earliest possible day favor the readers with an account of his very latest triumph. Until such time, let us say adieu.

THE END.

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